

Preface

Years after the death of his beloved daughter Sophie, Freud showed Hilda Doolittle a charm that he wore on his watchband, stating as he pointed to it, “She is here” (Doolittle 1956, 77). It would be hard to imagine a more dramatic example of a lost object that is not lost. In Freud’s poignant gesture, the deceased person, now transformed, has become part of the mourner’s life. The charm (object permanence) is juxtaposed with the timepiece (the passing of time).

As the essays in this special issue of *American Imago* argue, Freud’s gesture is emblematic of the interrelatedness of *psychic* and *social* responses to loss. Although Freud initially posited an apparently firm distinction between mourning and melancholia, this premise is called into question not only by his own later work, and that of other psychoanalysts, but especially by contemporary approaches to the workings of remembering and forgetting.

Freud could baldly ask Marie Bonaparte, “Why should a thing that emanates from man endure on that account, when everything in the universe must perish?” (qtd. in von Unwerth 2005, 177). This might seem an odd question coming from the man who worked while seated at his desk surrounded by his collection of antiquities, lost objects that had been recovered from the ground. Yet Freud insists to Bonaparte that it would be incorrect to exempt humans from being part of the natural world and its unending change. In the natural world, he points out, birth and death are facts of life, and this finitude endows the world with beauty: “A flower that blossoms only for a single night does not seem to us on that account less lovely” (1916, 306). His example seems contrived, since no matter how much we may enjoy a flower, we know that in the next season new flowers will grow to replace the ones that die. We do not value them as individuals. But the force of Freud’s claim is to make

mourning part of the natural cycle, the unfolding of beauty against the relentless passing of time.

In both “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) and “On Transience,” written for inclusion in a 1916 volume of patriotic and memorial essays relating to World War I,¹ mourning is portrayed as a stage of normal human development, but also as a riddle. Much like the Greek myth of Tithonus, who was cursed by being granted eternal life but denied eternal youth, Freud reminds us that “limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment raises the value of the enjoyment” (1916, 305).

An end to mourning is predicated by Freud’s model of the mind. Each human psyche begins in a state of narcissism, then looks out into the world, finding objects to love and attach to by means of that self-love. When confronted with loss, a person will withdraw his or her attachment to the object and then find a new object to cathect, as one “flower” replaces another. Once an individual’s self-love has recovered from the blow, it will eventually reach out again to the outside world.

In his initial formulations, Freud optimistically presents mourning as a “temporary disruption” that will be overcome. Reality forces the mourner to relinquish the object, and life then goes on simply by virtue of the passing of time. Freud even claims that it is possible not only to rebuild affection for what is precious but also to put it “perhaps on firmer ground and more lastingly than before” (1916, 307). However, this course of development is not followed by everyone. Some individuals experience loss in a way that totally absorbs them and they fall prey to melancholia. This state is marked by “a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings” (1917, 244).

This remains today a vivid description of the enigma embedded in Freud’s idea of “the shadow of the object” falling on the ego. At one level, Freud suggests that in melancholia precious human energy is wasted on vain hopes of denying time and its effects, and he sounds as dismissive here of melancholia as a psychic formation as he is of those who believe in an afterlife. But unlike belief in the afterlife, which can function to reassure people, melancholia leaves the sufferer with no relief since the

object is permanently lost. In its most intense form, where the loss of the object is denied, no real mourning will take place, and the melancholic will not be able to regain stability and form an attachment to a new external object.

Although “Mourning and Melancholia” continues to be mined for ideas deriving from his distinction between the two responses to loss, self-observation led Freud to alter his theory of mourning as he encountered the sheer intractability of the sadness about tragic deaths in his family and among his friends. Object loss, he came to believe, led not to recovery but to a seemingly permanent sense that something was not right. The distinction he had tried so hard to draw between mourning and melancholia simply did not hold.

By the time he wrote *The Ego and the Id* (1923), mourning and melancholy had become indistinguishable in theoretical terms. Like the charm hanging on Freud’s watchband, the lost object was now viewed as a permanent part of the life of the mourner. Because of the pain of his own bereavements, Freud could no longer avoid the question: how is external loss implicated in self-love and vice versa?

Building on Freud’s ideas but also on those of Karl Abraham (Sánchez-Pardo 2003), Melanie Klein went further than both of them in grounding melancholia in object relations. Abraham’s (1916) particular emphasis, as he was writing in parallel to Freud, was on outlining the details of the stages that led to melancholic depression, and on differentiating as much as possible between it and obsessional neurosis. In order to accomplish this, he had to line up the stages of psychic development with the types of object relations they represented. His schema included part objects, a concept that would be used by Klein. The process begins with the oral incorporative stage in which no objects exist for the psyche, then progresses to partial objects and finally culminates in mature genital object love. Abraham attributes depression to aggression and sadistic impulses, which must be acknowledged in order for more mature object relations to be achieved.

In Abraham’s schema, the psyche “takes in” and “expels” objects, much as a person ingests and excretes food. What is taken in comes from the outside, meaning that the psyche is not a self-contained unit motivated solely by internal drives.

The different modes of taking in and expelling lead to corresponding levels of stability and mental disturbance. Now social roles are inextricably implicated in melancholia, since the social context of ingestion and expulsion differs according to, for example, gender, race, and sexual orientation. The four essays gathered here address this very issue: that mourning is not an isolated action, but instead is bound up with all the pressures that shape (and misshape) social identities, and is therefore inseparable from all the ways in which psychic identities are to be understood as primarily relational, or social, in their formation. Mourning and melancholia in this second model offer a way of understanding the *social* formation of the psyche itself.

A further crucial post-Freudian development occurs in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's work (1976; 1987) on the topographies of illnesses of melancholia that result when familial, sociopolitical, and cultural losses are left unspoken by parents or a generation of parental figures. Such silenced traumas—or secrets—end up being transmitted unconsciously across generations and thereby “encrypted” or “incorporated” in their descendants whose hauntedness by what has never been properly mourned leaves them resistant to the processes of introjection central to subject-formation.

A complementary perspective in the German psychoanalytic tradition is offered by the classic study by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior* (1967). The Mitscherlichs set out to understand the responses of Germans in the aftermath of World War II, confronted as they were with the crushing humiliation of national defeat, the loss of an embodiment of a German ego ideal in Hitler, and the equally devastating understanding that the German people, through narcissistic identification with this ego ideal, were collectively responsible for millions of monstrous deaths. The Mitscherlichs hypothesize that the German people avoided the self-devaluation of a melancholic guilt through “breaking all affective bridges to the immediate past” (26), employing for this purpose a massive yet unconscious self-protective psychic mechanism that de-realized, or denied, affective identifications with everything that constituted the reality of the Third Reich.

Gabriele Schwab's profound essay, “Replacement Children: The Transgenerational Transmission of Traumatic Loss,” demon-

strates that the Mitscherlichs' psychoanalytically oriented social psychology offers crucial ways to understand reaction formations to the trauma of loss and its transgenerational transmission at personal and political, individual and collective, levels. Drawing in part on her own experience, Schwab studies the manic defenses at work in the psychic investments of parents in their replacement children—that is, offspring born either in the wake of an individual sibling's death or in the aftermath of histories of wartime violence or genocide, and who end up being unknowing carriers of unconscious fantasies of the former generation, bearers of unburied losses.

As Schwab argues, each lost child must be mourned as a unique individual. When this does not take place, replacement children receive what Vamik Volkan and Gabriele Ast (1997) refer to as “deposit representations”: second-hand experiences of death from the parents' unmourned loss, the legacy of a parental or generational distortion of mourning after a traumatic history. Schwab traces such haunting of a replacement child in Philippe Grimbert's memoir, *Secret* (2004), a text that in her view serves as a transformative object for the writer in its evocation and narrative binding of otherwise overwhelming feelings, which resulted from Philippe's inheritance of his parents' unconscious fantasies that he would “replace” his elder brother who had been killed in Nazi death camps, and in whose shadow Philippe grew up.

A leading authority on the work of Abraham and Torok, Esther Rashkin, whose most recent book is thoughtfully reviewed by Michael G. Levine in a pendant to this issue, also addresses the legacies of violent and traumatic histories—individual and collective—that remain silenced, unburied losses. In “Unmourned Dead, Filtered History, and the Screening of Anti-Semitism in Kieślowski's *A Short Film About Killing*,” Rashkin focuses on events in postwar Poland as played out in Krzysztof Kieślowski's 1988 film. Rashkin treats the film's clear indictment of capital punishment as, equally significantly, a palimpsestic cinematographic, historical, and psychoanalytic encrypting of layers of unmourned violence from Poland's experience of successive traumas, both during and after World War II: the martyrdom of the country's Catholics during Nazi and Soviet occupation, and the massive extermination of its Jews during World War II—deaths that remain unmourned because Poland's tradition of

anti-Semitism functioned collusively in the Nazi de-judification itself.

Extending Rashkin's focus on film, Marilyn Fabe draws in "Mourning *Vertigo*" on the influential theories of Christian Metz and Giorgio Agamben to illuminate Alfred Hitchcock's classic cinematic "case study" of melancholia. Rather than analyzing this phenomenon primarily within the narrative, however, Fabe first examines *Vertigo* as an enactment of, and metacommentary on, the inherently melancholic nature of watching a film, since the experience leads audience members to become absorbed in imaginary signifiers for which no counterpart exists in reality. Hitchcock's masterpiece, Fabe argues, implicates its spectators in a perverse scenario that invokes acute melancholia through holding out the false hope of recovering an impossible object. Scottie's desire to possess Madeleine, who even as a character is an imaginary signifier—counterfeit, an artifice, a phony object of desire—positions him in a way that mirrors the spectator's experience. This mirroring structure, between the film's spectators and Scottie, fosters the identification with Scottie's desire to retrieve Madeleine by generations of filmgoers who watch the film again and again, and who seek to locate the impossible objects that supposedly exist behind the images by traveling to the film's shooting locations.

Finally, in "The Poetics of Loss: Erotic Melancholia in Agamben and Dickinson," Joanne Feit Diehl likewise draws on Giorgio Agamben's recasting of Freud's concept of a melancholic object. Agamben posits that melancholia might be better understood not as a narcissistic, regressive reaction to the loss of a love object, but instead as "the imaginative capacity to make an unobtainable object appear as if lost" (1979, 20). For Agamben, the melancholic turns to his or her imagination to possess—or to make available through its having been lost—an object that in fact was never there in the first place. Such imaginative "restoration," suggests Agamben, allows the melancholic a potential mastery that is psychically comforting in its very making of the unreal real, albeit as absence and loss. In Diehl's analysis, the "unreal object of melancholy" (Agamben 1979, 25) opens up a space at work in Dickinson's poetry. Through close readings of several enigmatic lyrics, Diehl offers a complex model of how the psyche works through the aesthetic to disavow, while trans-

forming, the social. The poet can both “bury” the lost object and yet have an intense erotic relationship with it; the absence is inseparably intertwined with desire.

As these four exemplary essays demonstrate, much of the most vital and inspiring new work on mourning confirms while extending Freud’s seminal insights. Contemporary psychoanalytic concepts have refined our capacity to weigh the gains and costs in all the vicissitudes of mourning. They also help us to trace the interplay between the sociopolitical and psychic forces that impact both our individual and our collective ability to reshape the affective reverberations catalyzed by loss.

Women and Gender Studies Program
University of California
Davis, CA 95616
elconstable@ucdavis.edu

Religious Studies Program
University of California
Davis, CA 95616
nhjanowitz@ucdavis.edu

Note

1. Other contributors to the volume included Albert Einstein, Arthur Schnitzler, Hugo von Hofmannstahl, and Richard Strauss.

References

- Abraham, Karl. 1916. The First Preenatal Stage of the Libido. In *Selected Papers of Karl Abraham*. Trans. Douglas Bryan and Alix Strachey. New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1979, pp. 248–79.
- Abraham, Nicolas, and Maria Torok. 1976. *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*. Trans. Nicolas Rand. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- . 1987. *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Nicolas Rand. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Agamben, Giorgio. 1979. *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*. Trans. Ronald L. Martinez. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Doolittle, Hilda. 1956. *Tribute to Freud*. Boston: David R. Godine.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1916. On Transience. *S.E.*, 14:303–7.
- . 1917. Mourning and Melancholia. *S.E.*, 14:237–58.
- . 1923. *The Ego and the Id*. *S.E.*, 19:1–59.
- Grimbert, Philippe. 2004. *Secret*. Trans. Polly McClean. London: Portobello Books, 2008.
- Mitscherlich, Alexander, and Margarete Mitscherlich. 1967. *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior*. Trans. Beverly Placzek. New York: Grove Press, 1975.
- Sánchez-Pardo, Esther. 2003. *Melanie Klein and Modernist Melancholia*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- von Unwerth, Matthew. 2005. *Freud's Requiem: Mourning, Memory, and the Invisible History of a Summer Walk*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Volkan, Vamik, and Gabriele Ast. 1997. *Siblings in the Unconscious and Psychopathology: Womb Fantasies, Claustrophobias, Fear of Pregnancy, Murderous Rage, Animal Symbolism*. Madison, CT: International Universities Press.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.